When Your Routine Gets You Too Close For Comfort...

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It was the rev-watch (0400-0800), and our ship was steaming at 23 knots through waters just west of the Strait of Malacca to another unrep rendezvous. Traffic had been busy most of the evening, mostly small fishing boats randomly scattered along the ships PIM (point of intended movement) track. Many contacts were not visible on radar or, at best, became visible at ranges of only three to seven nautical miles. An escort frigate was patrolling a sector three to six nautical miles in front of us to aid in screening potential problem vessels as we headed home from deployment. Most contacts during the watch so far had been outside the ship's "safety bubble" or required only slight course changes on our part to put them there.

The unrep rendezvous was scheduled for 0700. It still was dark as we closed the rendezvous point at 0500, and the watch pace shifted as both our bridge team and that on our escort ship began attempts over tactical circuits to contact the vessel with which we would unrep.

Getting no responses, we decided to wait until we were closer to our rendezvous point, and we read our checklists to prepare for the unrep. We noticed only about 20 or so small, dimly lit contacts scattered across the horizon. Sunrise came at 0552, and the contact picture suddenly changed exponentially, with over 100 along the horizon. Most were to starboard and had strong, right-bearing drift. At 0610, the designated enlisted bridge team for the unrep was called to the bridge to begin watch turnover and to take their stations.

We continued following our escort along our track, proceeding through a large gap in the string of contacts across the horizon. We had only a few contacts off the port side that might be of some concern, so we shifted our base course a few degrees to starboard to allow a bit more room to pass around those port contacts.

The conning officer determined from the port bridge-wing pelorus that these contacts had left bearing drift. The junior officer of the watch (also an officer of the deck under instruction) worked the contacts on a maneuvering board and determined they were dead in the water, with a CPA (closest point of approach) of 1,200 yards on the port beam in 25 minutes. This estimate was compared to CIC's solution on the same contacts: a CPA of 2,100 yds. Quite a difference!

Following our initial course change, a contact report that recommended maintaining course and speed was made to the CO at 0615. He concurred, and CIC continued to monitor the contacts and to provide updates via the JL phone talker.

At 0620, we had good radar contact with the ship with which we would rendezvous and closed on our rendezvous position as agreed. The bridge teams on the escort ship and our ship again began tactical circuit and bridge-to-bridge attempts to communicate with the replenishment ship, all to no avail. About this same time, we decided to maneuver a little to starboard to allow more distance from port-side contacts and to prepare to take station on the replenishment ship. At 0624, the oncoming watch team came to the bridge with the conning officer relieving first, and, at the same time, the CIC watch officers changed in combat. At 0626, the oncoming officer of the deck—wearing the bright yellow hat that distinguishes the OOD from everyone else on the bridge—reported to the bridge to begin an early turnover. He noticed two port-side contacts and began to check the radar for the rest of the surface picture, while being updated by the offgoing OOD on morning events.

At 0630, word was passed to station the underway-replenishment detail, thus ramping up the rest of the crew involved in the pending unrep. This event required additional safety watches on the bridge.

At 0635, the oncoming JOOW (also an OOD under instruction, or U/I) reported to the bridge to begin the watch turnover. At about the same time, with the offgoing OOD on the starboard bridge wing discussing the visual surface picture with his relief, the JOOW noticed the port-side contacts appeared to be making way and reducing the CPA. The OOD ordered the conning officer to alter course to the right. The OOD noticed the JOOW had addressed the contacts and returned to his turnover and preparations for the unrep. He overheard the replenishment ship pass over bridge-to-bridge radio to the escort, its intentions to pass starboard to starboard with the escort, close his ship to three miles, then make a port turn to come to replenishment course and speed.

The OOD became concerned with the 40-knot, relative closure rate with the other ship, which was steering directly toward him at a distance of 12 nautical miles. He also was concerned how to take station once the ship had turned. At 0640, the JOOW verbally passed the deck to the oncoming OOD.

Confusion occurred during watch turnover. The oncoming watch team changed the plan for who was supposed to take the deck to who actually took it. For some reason, it was decided the person who normally stood OOD would stand JOOW during this watch. The offgoing OOD, therefore, was turning over unknowingly to the JOOW, who then went to the off-going JOOW and reported he was ready to relieve. The offgoing JOOW—assuming this was the OOD ready to take the watch—passed the deck.

This action took the actual oncoming OOD by surprise, since he had not received an adequate turnover, but he verbally took the deck anyway. The offgoing OOD, now realizing the confusion taking place, remained on deck to continue giving a turnover to the actual OOD. Meanwhile, the port-side contacts continued to close CPA, so the order was given to come even farther to right to open CPA. Three minutes later, the CO came to the bridge to

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prepare for the unrep and immediately felt uncomfortable with the surface picture he saw outside the bridge windows. He thus ordered a course alteration more to starboard and asked that danger signals repeatedly be passed via the ship's whistle. The follow-up moboard CPA computed by CIC was now 250 yards!

A mishap results from a chain of events. In our case, the ship was fortunate that such a chain was broken by a seasoned and "fresh" set of eyes (those of the CO), an individual who knows a fundamental principle of seamanship: Keep the ship safe from collision and grounding at all times! The unrep was secondary to the safe maneuvering of the ship and could be set any time later in waters with a better surface picture.

anyone within earshot. A trained operations specialist could better determine what information was important and immediately and regularly had to be passed to the bridge.

Following established watch-relief procedures also would have eliminated confusion. Having only the designated OOD relief show up with the identifying yellow cover and staggering other watch-relief times so they didn't all occur when so much was happening would have helped to minimize confusion.

Here are some actions performed, which avoided a possible collision during this evolution:

• Maneuvering to maintain appropriate bearing drift (contacts to port had some left bearing drift throughout the incident).

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This scenario offers several lessons to avoid future close calls, or worse. The causes of this near-mishap can be narrowed to these problems:

• Focusing on a pending evolution, rather than on the current overall navigation picture,

• Failure to follow up a moboard solution on contacts of concern,

• Inadequate communication between CIC and the bridge team, and

• Not following watch-relief procedures.

First, the OOD should have been aware how quickly events were moving beyond the watch team's ability to handle without assistance. He should not have hesitated to call the CO earlier for advice. A fresh perspective usually can shed new light on a situation and see something the watch team might have missed because of what became seemingly routine during their watch, in this case the presence and similar behavior of so many contacts.

Second, continuously plotting contacts' movements with follow-up moboards would have indicated earlier the unfolding situation. CIC was following up these contacts but didn't effectively relay the information to the bridge. In this case, the person relaying the information was an inexperienced phone talker to whom multiple numbers for ranges, bearings, CPAs, and times didn't appear to be significant, other than simply announcing them to

• At least one person (the conning officer) continuously was aware of the contacts, despite not being forthright about his level of concern for them.

• The appearance of a new set of eyes (the CO) enabled a clear evaluation of the situation, which led to appropriate and immediate action.

Among the valuable lessons learned from this event are those which might seem basic, but—though often overlooked—are nonetheless fundamental to good seamanship and never must be forgotten:

• Every mariner's first responsibility is to keep his ship safe from collision and grounding.

• Call the CO if matters begin to get out of hand or pressing questions must be answered.

• Be alert for potential or developing in-extremis situations.

• Moboards rarely (if ever) will fail you if you regularly use them, including for following up on contact movements.

• Always follow established watch-standing and watch-relief procedures.

The author wrote this article while assigned to his previous afloat command.